

## Luis G. Fortuño

### 1960–

RESIDENT COMMISSIONER 2005–2009  
NEW PROGRESSIVE FROM PUERTO RICO

The first Resident Commissioner to caucus with the Republican Party since the 92nd Congress (1971–1973), Luis G. Fortuño served one term in the U.S. House of Representatives before becoming governor of Puerto Rico in 2009. As a principal figure in Puerto Rico's Partido Nuevo Progresista (New Progressive Party, or PNP), he was the primary advocate for Puerto Rican statehood during his tenure in Washington and an outspoken critic of the island's limited influence in Congress. "After 106 years of territorial status, and 88 years of being U.S. citizens, we are tired of waiting," Fortuño said in March 2005. "The people of Puerto Rico deserve better. We have earned the right to be heard."<sup>1</sup>

Luis G. Fortuño was born October 31, 1960, in San Juan, Puerto Rico. The son of a dentist, Fortuño was educated at a private high school and graduated from Georgetown University with a bachelor's of science in foreign service in 1982.<sup>2</sup> He attended law school at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, earning a J.D. in 1985, after which he returned to Puerto Rico and began practicing at one of the island's premier law firms.<sup>3</sup> He made a name for himself in the legal world of corporate finance, and in 1993 he was appointed executive director of the Puerto Rico Tourism Company, where he worked to attract new business to the island.<sup>4</sup> In 1994 PNP governor Pedro Rosselló selected Fortuño to lead Puerto Rico's Department of Economic Development and Commerce, an umbrella agency that was responsible for the oversight of several government bureaus.<sup>5</sup> Fortuño and his wife, Lucé, have triplets (two sons and a daughter).<sup>6</sup>

Fortuño left the Rosselló administration a short while later and "became something of a white knight for his party, symbolizing youth and fresh ideas," according to the *Miami Herald*.<sup>7</sup> In what appeared to be a changing of the guard, Rosselló declined to run for re-election,

and Fortuño joined a crowded field seeking the PNP nomination. He withdrew in June 1999, however, and resumed practicing law for clients as far away as Florida.<sup>8</sup> A member of the Republican National Committee from Puerto Rico, Fortuño kept a low profile until 2003, when he entered the race for Resident Commissioner.<sup>9</sup>

The island's incumbent Resident Commissioner, Aníbal Acevedo-Vilá of the Partido Popular Democrático (Popular Democratic Party, or PPD), opted to run for governor in 2004, clearing the way for the PNP's bold campaign to re-take the seat. Roughly a year before the general election, Fortuño beat out three other candidates for the PNP nomination, including former Resident Commissioner Carlos Romero-Barceló. His opponent in the general election was Roberto Prats of the PPD.<sup>10</sup>

As in every election on the island since the 1950s, the future of Puerto Rico's relationship with the federal government emerged as a dominant issue early on.<sup>11</sup> In the early 2000s, the George W. Bush administration began laying out options for Puerto Rico's future status; commonwealth status, the island's longstanding arrangement with the federal government, was not initially included. An advocate for Puerto Rican statehood, Fortuño supported the Bush administration's proposal. "The federal government can have a relationship with a state, or with a sovereign nation," the PNP candidate said that December. "At the end of the day, you really have two options, I believe: either statehood or independence."<sup>12</sup>

Unlike most Puerto Rican elections, the 2004 race attracted national attention. For the first time in more than 30 years, there was a chance that Puerto Rico's next Resident Commissioner would caucus with the GOP.<sup>13</sup> Although Fortuño had identified with the Republican Party since college, his House campaign signaled a larger political trend. "It's been a priority of the Republican Party



and the House leadership to recruit more Hispanics into the party and Luis Fortuño was pretty much a dream candidate for this Resident Commissioner spot in Puerto Rico,” said a national GOP official.<sup>14</sup> Fortuño campaigned from San Juan to Madison Square Garden and spoke at the Republican National Convention three months before the election.<sup>15</sup>

At home, Fortuño campaigned on his belief that Puerto Rico was more conservative than most people realized. He focused his platform on lowering taxes, limiting government influence, and achieving statehood.<sup>16</sup> The race was extremely close, and early results put Fortuño ahead with a slight lead. His margin shrank throughout the evening, but by the end of the week he had squeaked by Prats with 48.8 percent of the vote—a victory of one-half of 1 percent.<sup>17</sup>

At the start of the 109th Congress (2005–2007), the Republicans appointed Fortuño to the Committees on Education and the Workforce, Resources, and Transportation and Infrastructure, all of which had jurisdiction over issues that were important to Puerto Rico. Early in the first session, he supported the Job Training Improvement Act of 2005 as well as the Transportation Equity Act.<sup>18</sup> The first bill Fortuño introduced—the Caribbean National Forest Act of 2005 (H.R. 539), placing Puerto Rico’s El Toro Wilderness under the National Wilderness Preservation System—became law in December 2005, capping an ambitious first session in which Fortuño also worked to reform the island’s tax code and its Medicare system. “There are 100 different issues people have been trying to get on the table since the 1980s,” he told the *Miami Herald* in 2006. “The big difference is that as a member of the Republican conference, I sit at the table.”<sup>19</sup>

With a four-year term as Resident Commissioner, Fortuño did not have to think about re-election right away, and in summer 2005 he created a political action committee called L.U.I.S.—“Leading Us in Success”—to defray his travel costs while he campaigned for other members of the GOP. “Being a Hispanic, a Puerto Rican and a Republican, certainly I believe I can be helpful in a number of places,” he told a Capitol Hill newspaper that July.<sup>20</sup>

In the second session Fortuño offered his defining piece of legislation: the Puerto Rico Democracy Act of 2006 (H.R. 4867). Together with 110 co-sponsors, Fortuño introduced the bill on the 89th anniversary of Puerto Ricans’ American citizenship in hopes of renegotiating the island’s relationship with the federal government. The measure recommended two plebiscites and “[guaranteed] that the terms and conditions of Puerto Rico’s future be developed jointly and democratically by the people of Puerto Rico and the Congress and not by the whims of an elite few,” Fortuño said. The first plebiscite would determine whether Puerto Rican voters wanted “to remain a U.S. territory.” If voters chose what Fortuño called a “constitutionally viable permanent non-territorial status,” the second plebiscite would be held to determine whether they favored independence or statehood.<sup>21</sup> Fortuño believed that statehood would galvanize the people of Puerto Rico, and he pointed to Hawaii as a model for what could happen in the Caribbean.<sup>22</sup> The House referred his bill to the Resources Committee, but it was not acted on.

In the 110th Congress (2007–2009), Fortuño lost his spot in the majority after the Democrats regained control of the House for the first time since 1995. He kept his seats on the Education and Resources Committees but moved from Transportation to the Committee on Foreign Affairs.<sup>23</sup> GOP House leaders also named Fortuño Ranking Member of Natural Resources’ Subcommittee on Insular Affairs, which oversaw the federal government’s relationship with its territories. This assignment carried additional weight after Fortuño was named chairman of the Congressional Hispanic Conference in 2007.<sup>24</sup>

The 110th Congress opened with a debate after Democrats proposed allowing statutory representatives to vote on amendments in the Committee of the Whole.<sup>25</sup> Fortuño was the only Republican who would be affected by the bill, and he supported it alongside the Delegates from the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The measure passed and was celebrated for its “symbolic importance,” but its limited scope meant the measure had little influence on the legislative process. Nevertheless, Fortuño hoped the vote

would be the first step toward resolving America's often-nebulous insular-federal relationship. "What the House really needs to do for the almost 4 million U.S. citizens that I represent before the Senate, the executive branch, as well as this House is to authorize a self-determination process for Puerto Rico.... What my constituents really deserve is the opportunity to seek equal representation and equal responsibilities in the Federal system or, alternatively, the freedom of a sovereign nation," he said.<sup>26</sup>

Fortuño spent much of the rest of the 110th Congress pushing to reform Puerto Rico's status, along with its tax code and its Medicare and Medicaid systems.<sup>27</sup> With legislation like the Puerto Rico Economic Stimulus Act of 2007 (H.R. 1339), Fortuño fought to improve health care and general services for the island's military personnel and veterans.<sup>28</sup>

In 2008, Fortuño ran for governor of Puerto Rico against incumbent Aníbal Acevedo-Vilá. Federal prosecutors had indicted Acevedo-Vilá earlier in the year on multiple counts of violating campaign finance law, and though he was cleared of all wrongdoing a few months later, the incident cast a long shadow over the campaign. The island needed new leadership in order to "re-establish the people's confidence in their government," Fortuño said.<sup>29</sup> That November Fortuño won the governor's mansion by a wide margin.<sup>30</sup>

## FOR FURTHER READING

*Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, "Luis G. Fortuño," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

## NOTES

- 1 *Congressional Record*, House, 109th Cong., 1st sess. (2 March 2005): H918.
- 2 Damien Cave, "Puerto Rico Governor Promises Change," 28 November 2008, *New York Times*: A28.
- 3 "Puerto Rico's Governor Appoints Secretary for New Umbrella Department," 11 July 1994, *Business Wire*.
- 4 "Puerto Rico's Governor Appoints Secretary for New Umbrella Department"; "Puerto Rico Hotel Plans Announced," 17 February 1994, *Miami Herald*: A24; "Tourism," 11 October 1994, *Orlando*

*Sentinel*: B1; Don Long, "Travel Notes," 4 June 1995, *Denver Post*: T2.

- 5 "Puerto Rico's Governor Appoints Secretary for New Umbrella Department."
- 6 Alicia Colon, "Untapped Conservatives," 9 August 2004, *New York Sun*: 10.
- 7 Susan Anasagasti and Frances Robles, "Indicted Governor Faces Tough Challenge; Puerto Rico Gov. Aníbal Acevedo Vilá Is in a Tight Race to Keep His Job," 3 November 2008, *Miami Herald*: A16. For more on the Rosselló administration, see César J. Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History since 1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007): 291–315, especially 302–303.
- 8 Ivan Roman, "Party Pushes Pesquera for Governor's Job," 14 June 1999, *Orlando Sentinel*: A10; quotation from Kathy Bushouse and Doreen Hemlock, "Puerto Ricans Expand Donations to GOP; Bush; Some Islanders See Governor as Friendly to Their Issues," 14 October 2002, *Sun-Sentinel* (Ft. Lauderdale, FL): A1.
- 9 Ed Silverman, "Despite Troubling Questions, the Drug Industry Is Booming in Puerto Rico," 21 July 2002, *The Star-Ledger* (Newark, NJ): Business, 1.
- 10 "Puerto Rico Hopefuls Start Bids for Office," 2 August 2003, *Orlando Sentinel*: A14.
- 11 Matthew Hay Brown, "Puerto Rico's Commonwealth Could Slip Away; Some See Signs That Washington Will Seek a Vote on Statehood or Independence," 25 July 2004, *Orlando Sentinel*: A22.
- 12 Matthew Hay Brown, "Puerto Ricans May Have to Choose; President Bush Named a Panel to Look into Settling the Political Status of the Island," 12 December 2003, *Orlando Sentinel*: A17.
- 13 The last Resident Commissioner to sit with Republicans was New Progressive Jorge Luis Córdova-Díaz, who won the right to vote in committee during the early 1970s and then had to choose sides in Washington. Since 1973, every Puerto Rican representative in Washington has chosen to sit with the Democrats, regardless of whether he belonged to the PPD or the PNP. Neither of the island's two main political parties had formal ties to Democrats or Republicans on Capitol Hill, but during the 1990s PNP officials in the Rosselló administration, including Fortuño, implemented economic principles favored by the GOP to align their push for statehood with policy on the mainland, according to historians César J. Ayala and Rafael Bernabe. See Ayala and Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century*: 291–315.
- 14 Quotation from Jennifer Yachnin, "GOP Makes History with Puerto Rican's Election," 4 November 2004, *Roll Call*: 10. It was also a presidential election year, and officials from both mainland parties expected the campaign in Puerto Rico to gauge the political leanings of what *Roll Call* termed "the all-important Latino voting bloc." See also Nicole Duran, "Both Parties Now Interested in Puerto Rico," 15 December 2003, *Roll Call*: 11. See also Teddy

- Davis, "Fortuño Latest Member to Start His Own PAC," 5 July 2005, *Roll Call*: 9; *Politics in America, 2008* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 2007): 1130.
- 15 Colon, "Untapped Conservatives"; Luiza Ch. Savage, "Praise of Bush Opens Convention," 31 August 2004, *New York Sun*: 3; Lindsey Kerr, "Profile: Del. Luis Fortuño, R-Puerto Rico," 12 March 2005, United Press International.
- 16 Colon, "Untapped Conservatives"; Kerr, "Profile: Del. Luis Fortuño"; Yachnin, "GOP Makes History with Puerto Rican's Election."
- 17 Ray Quintanilla, "Puerto Rico Governor's Race in Virtual Deadlock," 3 November 2004, *Orlando Sentinel*: A13; "Election Statistics, 1920 to the Present," <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>.
- 18 *Congressional Record*, House, 109th Cong., 1st sess. (2 March 2005): H877; *Congressional Record*, House, 109th Cong., 1st sess. (9 March 2005): H1047.
- 19 Frances Robles, "Lawyer Hopes to Beat Odds to Win Statehood; Resident Commissioner Luis Fortuño Is Latest Hope to Win Statehood for U.S. Territory," 3 April 2006, *Miami Herald*: A10.
- 20 Davis, "Fortuño Latest Member to Start His Own PAC."
- 21 *Congressional Record*, Extension of Remarks, 109th Cong., 2nd sess. (2 March 2006): E265–E266. See also Vanessa Bauzá, "Island Debates Its State; Will They Join U.S.? Bills May Help Decide," 16 July 2007, *Sun-Sentinel* (Fort Lauderdale, FL): A1.
- 22 Frances Robles, "Bills Address Thorny Issue of Puerto Rico's Status," 3 April 2006, *Miami Herald*: A10.
- 23 In the 110th Congress, the Education and the Workforce Committee became the Education and Labor Committee, and the Resources Committee was renamed the Natural Resources Committee.
- 24 Gary Martin, "Hispanic Groups Hail the Growing Clout of Latinos," 4 January 2007, *San Antonio Express-News*: A4; *Politics in America, 2008*: 1130; Garrison Nelson and Charles Stewart III, *Committees in the U.S. Congress, 1993–2010* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2011): 710.
- 25 *Congressional Record*, House, 110th Cong., 1st sess. (24 January 2007): 2135–2136. Delegates and Resident Commissioners were last given voting privileges on the floor about a decade before, when Democrats controlled the House. For more information, see Jim Abrams, "Non-State House Delegates Gain Limited Votes; Republicans Say Democrats' Move Unconstitutional," 25 January 2007, *Sun-Sentinel* (Ft. Lauderdale, FL): A3.
- 26 *Congressional Record*, House, 110th Cong., 1st sess. (24 January 2007): H899.
- 27 As Fortuño wrote to the editors of *New York Times* in May 2008, "Puerto Ricans ... have never had the chance to vote on whether they are satisfied with the existing arrangement in the context of a fair and orderly self-determination process sponsored by Congress." See Luis G. Fortuño, "Puerto Rico's Status," 29 May 2008, *New York Times*: A24. On status issues, see David Lightman, "Wider Puerto Rican Vote Proposed; Would Include Those Living on Mainland," 28 February 2007, *Hartford Courant*: A2; Vanessa Bauzá, "Island Debates Its State; Will They Join the U.S.? Bills May Help Decide," 16 July 2007, *Sun-Sentinel* (Ft. Lauderdale, FL): A1; Mike Williams, "Puerto Rico Mulls Statehood, Commonwealth: A Bill for a Referendum on Becoming the 51st State Triggers the Debate," 23 December 2007, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*: A12. Other prominent bills of Fortuño's included the Puerto Rico Medicare Reimbursement Equity Act of 2007 (H.R. 615); the Puerto Rico Hospitals Medicare DSH Equity Act of 2007 (H.R. 616); the Caribbean Basin Trade Enhancement Act of 2007 (H.R. 762); and the National Enterprise Zone Act of 2007 (H.R. 1340).
- 28 *Congressional Record*, House, 109th Cong., 1st sess. (3 May 2005): H2787. For Fortuño's support of the VA hospital in San Juan, see *Congressional Record*, House, 109th Cong., 1st sess. (13 September 2006): H6457–H6458.
- 29 Anasagasti and Robles, "Indicted Governor Faces Tough Challenge; Puerto Rico Gov. Aníbal Acevedo Vilá Is in a Tight Race to Keep His Job."
- 30 Frances Robles, "Embattled Puerto Rico Governor Soundly Defeated; Aníbal Acevedo Vilá, the Governor of Puerto Rico Who's Facing Charges of Campaign Finance Fraud, Lost by a Sizable Margin to Resident Commissioner Luis Fortuño," 5 November 2008, *Miami Herald*: A12.





“I AM A FIRM BELIEVER IN  
STATEHOOD FOR PUERTO RICO,  
BUT I RESPECT THE RIGHT OF  
MY CONSTITUENTS TO CHOOSE  
FREELY THE STATUS OF CHOICE  
OF THEIR PREFERENCE, BE IT  
AS A STATE OF THE UNION,  
AN INDEPENDENT REPUBLIC  
OR A REPUBLIC ASSOCIATED  
WITH THE UNITED STATES....  
UNTIL THIS PROCESS OF  
SELF-DETERMINATION IS  
COMPLETED, CONGRESS WILL  
NOT HAVE FULLY DISCHARGED  
ITS RESPONSIBILITY.”

Luis G. Fortuño  
*The Hill*, July 14, 2005